

# SPACE USE FOR ACTIVE LEARNING

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During my time at UQ, the community was undertaking a series of strategic and innovative initiatives focusing on the dual goal of increasing student engagement and supporting active learning. Attention to spaces was an element in many of these initiatives.

At one point, renovations had been made in existing classrooms that accommodated courses in which almost 16,000 UQ students were enrolled. These renovations were a major institutional investment.

The intended return on this investment was two-fold: to support active learning for current students and to capture data on how these renovated spaces were being used to inform planning of different types of active learning practices that UQ would better support into the future.

It is standard practice of the UQ Planning and Facilities Group (P&F) to audit classroom use. Their approach to determining how well the spaces were utilized was to count the number of students in rooms at different times of the day, and compare these counts against enrollment data from the room "booking system" (UQ parlance for the system of registrar room scheduling).

The P&F group pay no attention to how faculty use these spaces. Their only interest is the match between the number of students scheduled to be there relative to the number who were present when they made a count.

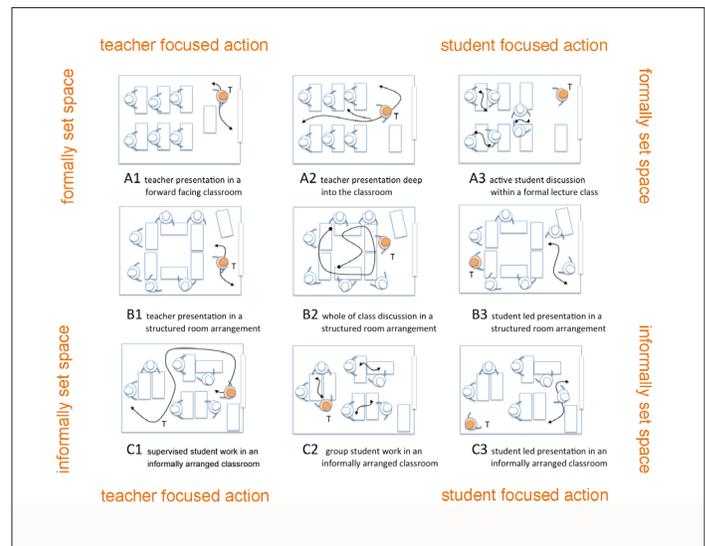
From the data they gathered it seemed as though the spaces were not being used as expected; given "booking" numbers, the spaces were not being highly utilized. Further, the P&F census counts were oddly characterized by a large variance—sometimes the census count matched closely, sometimes it was wildly off.

This was a trigger for a broader assessment of the impact the renovations were having. Without solid evidence of the positive impact of these active-learning spaces on learning and teaching at UQ, the traditional passive learning spaces (less costly to build and maintain) might remain the norm.

More practically, if the number of students expected in a class weren't present when the auditor dropped in to census the room, P&F concluded that the renovation resulted in an inefficient use of classroom space, and by extrapolation, obviously not "fit for purpose."

Our broader assessment began with the faculty. We recognized that there needed to be a shared language about what faculty want in a space, what works for them and why, before proceeding further. This is not easy to achieve.

One difficulty in understanding how faculty actually use space is finding a mechanism by which they can convey that information to you in a meaningful way. We considered and rejected many options (including intervalometers, video capture, etc.) before we arrived at a simple, low-tech process for getting faculty to tell us how they prefer to move around in a classroom while they are teaching.



This is a simple strategy, to have a faculty member draw how he or she moves and would prefer to move within a space using pictograms. It succeeded in engaging faculty in meaningful discussions.



This strategy emerged from a process during which we questioned faculty involved with and the data from the 456 room bookings from 2009 - 2011. We asked about the roles of faculty and other colleagues in the space, about the nature of the learning activities that they planned for the space, and about what faculty and their colleagues were looking for in a space in the process of booking it.

Finally, we invited further informal reflections from these faculty about if and how the space “booked” for their class worked for their class. This was a time-consuming and complicated process that ultimately resulted in the formal survey illustrated above.

From these discussions, we came to realize that a primary reason for the disconnect between occupancy data collected by P&F was that they were only gathering data in a single “census” week in a semester, rather than at various times throughout a semester. Faculty at UQ preferred to use a mix of pedagogical approaches during a single semester, including making as learning.

This information sparked an interesting “what if” question.

*What if spaces could be booked “ad hoc” for a month or for a particular class experience rather than only for an entire semester?*

The current booking system gave preference to faculty who sought a classroom for the entire semester over those who might need it for only part of a semester. The likelihood that they would be able to book a space designed for active-learning for less than the entire semester was not high.

UQ faculty go to great lengths to design a semester-long course using pedagogical approaches that are aligned with particular course content and learning outcomes, approaches that might require different kinds of spaces that allow that variance. So we asked other questions:

*Can one space do all?*

*Does it need to?*

*Do we have to make our processes for booking spaces as flexible as spaces & teaching practices faculty want to use?*

Perhaps.

